

## Interpreting Cultural Norms and Practices: a Study of Barthes' Semiology

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### Abstract

Language is both verbal and gestural, and as a social being, it is important for us to understand both forms. Often, we find that there are practices which led to misinterpretation of customs and values of society, thus leading to chaos and conflict. We, at times, are chained by the taboo and superstitious beliefs, which often led to malpractices. Thus, a proper and adequate understanding of these social norms and practices become important for the smooth functioning of communication and maintaining relationship in the human society. The paper will examine some of the social practices and cultural norms prevailing in the Bengali Hindu community and understand them in relation to Barthes' theory of semiology.

**Keywords:** Semiology, Ronald Barthes, cultural norms, Bengali community, social practices.

### 1. Introduction

The French linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, popularly known as the father of modern linguistics, had introduced the system of signification. Semioticians and linguists have since then been exploring the concepts of 'sign', 'signifier' and 'signified'. Thus, Semiotics or Semiology has not only evolved as a branch under Linguistics but has also been established as a branch of study in itself, owing to its popularity and application in different fields.

One such critic and scholar, Ronald Barthes have advanced his theory of semiology, based on which various cultural and social images can be understood. He, in his theory uses Saussure's

system of signification and structures a second system of signification based on Saussure's, providing a new dimension to thoughts and perspectives.

Thus, the present paper aims to explore the social and cultures norms and practice in one of the well-known and famous communities of Indian sub-continent – the Bengali community. Renowned for its fish-based dishes, Durga puja and world-famous sweets, the Bengali community is spread-out world-wide today. They carry along with them their cultural heritage wherever they breathe and flourish and as such, leave behind an indelible mark.

There are traditional cultural norms and practices that are age-old and are being carried on by the society even today. Some of these have become taboo whereas some are dragged out of pressure, force and compulsion from the senior generations. The present paper will thus examine the significance of some of these traditions found in the Bengali community today and explore their relevance in terms of Barthes' semiological concepts of 'denotative signs' and 'connotative signs'.

The paper will analyse the visual images and signs as found in the Hindu Bengali community across regions and applying Barthes' theory of interpreting 'signs' will provide insights to some aspects of culture and traditions in the existing society.

## **2. Literature Review**

Jadou and Ghabra (2021) in their paper presents a beautiful analysis of the different works of Barthes, highlighting their connection in relation to the interpretation of signs. They also refer to many studies conducted by scholars and have shown how different non-linguistic devices have been used in literature to interpret sign and symbols, providing them with a more convincing interpretation than the linguistic ones. The paper stated that the process of "signification" is concerned with the analysis of both - texts and visual texts.

Thakur, Roy, et al. (2024) in their study have mentioned about numerous findings that revealed the traditional customs in Indian families, particularly those related to the wellbeing of the mother and new-borns. These practices, some of which lack scientific evidence, have been deep ingrained in our social and cultural systems. Their study indicates that the education level in Indian society ranges from being illiterate to that of being a postgraduate. Therefore, the

illiterate women showed a higher tendency to follow and stick to the myths related to child-birth and post-birth compared to the educated women, perhaps owing to a better understanding. According to their reports it also became evident that women themselves have acknowledged that health personnel advise them on child-birth and post-birth issues against these existing myths.

Bhowmik (2019) in her study has reported that the Bengali community is augmented by mythologies and folklores. Bengali people of the north-eastern region are associated with Bangladesh for their origins and practice of various occupations such as fishing, business, etc. The culture and traditions of these people of north-east, thus, represents a fine blend of traditional and fashionable aspects. Right from the festivals up to the principles, the Bengali community of the north-east India have shown a major involvement in these norms and cultural practices.

Garg and Anand (2015) in their paper reflecting on menstruation claims that it is a phenomenon unique to girls and females. However, it has always been surrounded by taboos and myths based on which women are excluded from participating in many socio-cultural occasions. In India, it is a taboo till date in many regions and amongst many communities and that such taboos have negative impacts on girls' and women's emotional state, mentality as well as lifestyle and most importantly, on their health. The challenges in addressing the socio-cultural beliefs related to menstruation is further intensified by the lack of adequate knowledge and understanding of puberty, menstruation, and reproductive health in these women. Thus, they have suggested strategic approaches in combating these issues in the paper with an aim to create a social awareness.

Jacquelyn and Sinha (2023) in their study have focused on the association between menstrual pain, depression, anxiety, and stress among women. Their findings show that there happens to be a substantial negative connection between menstrual pain on one hand and depression, anxiety and stress in women on the other. It was evident that as the level of menstrual pain increased, the level of depression, the level of anxiety, and the level of stress decreased. However, experiencing some level of pain, mood changes, and stress during menstruation is normal and that these can significantly help women feel reassured. Many women also undergo

certain physical and emotional symptoms during their menstrual cycle, and that being aware of this connection can actually lessen alarms about abnormality and/or basic health issues.

Gaurav and Parbat (2024) in their paper examines '*The Palace of Illusions*' which is a re-telling of the famous Indian Epic, Mahabharata, from its lead female character named Draupadi (also named 'Panchali'). The study states that today's women are well-equipped and capable of handling their physical needs but in the ancient days they did not have good sanitary facilities. To add to that in those days women had to undergo numerous physical activities. Therefore, a woman who was going through her menstrual cycle could get a break from everything for those three days in a month. That was the time when others cooked and aided her. It would be the days when she could attend to her emotional needs and therefore is seen as a good way of protecting women. However, the study reports that out of sheer ignorance, people made this a prejudiced practice.

Future generations are born owing to the process of menstruation and if this process is considered to be impure, the very birth of next generation must also be termed as impure and hence, the process of creation itself would be impure (Gaurav and Parbat, 2024). Women were given rest during those days of her cycle but the society manipulated the healthy practice and started treating the women with disdain. Hence, the paper emphasises that Hindu mythology does not talk about women being impure but the patriarchal society in India had altered a boon into a bane for the women. The paper exerts that it is rather painful to see that the notions of the pre-Vedic era have undergone such tremendous changes degrading the values of the society.

### **3. Barthes' Semiology**

Semiotics is known to be the study of both the linguistic or verbal signs as well as the non-linguistic or non-verbal gestural or signs. We know that Barthes' semiotic theory is based on two aspects – the first being the 'explanation of myth' and the second being Saussure's concept of signification. Saussure's concept stated that 'signifier' and 'signified' are the two levels of understanding 'signs' and that in the absence of one, the other loses its importance. Thus, both - 'the signifier' and the 'signified' are important to understand the meaning of 'sign'. So, according to Saussure, 'sign' has two levels – one is 'signifier' and the other is 'signified'.

But Barthes views it differently stating that ‘sign’ is not the beginning of one’s understanding the concept but infact, ‘sign’ is the very outcome of the relationship established between the two entities of ‘signifier’ and ‘signified. That is to say, they work together in an inseparable bond to give rise to a unified sign.

Barthes, in connection to this, stated that the signified entity which is the direct image of the object – whether concrete or abstract - gives rise to a denotative meaning of the object spoken about or referred to. Thus, denotative meaning is the literal meaning of the ‘sign’ or the ‘word’. This he referred to as the “first order system” (Barthes, 1968).

To this, Barthes applied myth to construct a “second order system” in which the so-formed ‘sign’ of the first order system becomes the signifier of another ‘sign’ - a word or image. This triggers the interpretation or widening of the original meaning of the first-order system. Thus, this leads to the expansion of the original sense and widens the mental concept of the said first-order ‘sign’. This gives rise to different associated meanings of the said ‘sign’ and these meanings are what Barthes refers to as the connotative meaning. Thus, connotative meaning is related to the mental concepts.

Thus, Barthes can be credited with the honour of restructuring the field of semiotics from that of linguistics to visual images. Barthes illustrated that historical aspects and various cultural dimensions impact on the interpretation of a said ‘sign’. This leads to multiple meanings of the said ‘sign and thus enriches our visions and relations with the world around. Thus, using Barthes’ theory of semiology one can study the ways in which myths and beliefs in our society and culture are generated.

In fact, it is Barthes’ theory that brings in the extension of semiological signifieds (Jadou and Ghabra, 2021), referring to the function of a whole system serving communication and interaction in the human society. May it be the cultural norms, the superstitions, the taboo, the myths, the believes, the social customs – all of these are based on the relationship between the denotative meaning of the signified of the first-order system and the connotative meaning of the signified of the second-order system.

Thus, in terms of Barthes' theory of semiology one can say that signification is the process of linking the 'signifier' to the 'signified' to produce a meaning sign, which can have multiple layers of references.

#### **4. Moving Ahead from 'Denotative' to 'Connotative'**

The rich tradition and culture of the Bengali community in the Indian context is well-known to the world. There are cultural connotations which are visible at a wider scale in the Bengali community that is spread across the globe. Some of these cultural connotations have turned into hard-wired superstitions whereas some others are gradually fading away owing to increase in women literacy rates as pointed out by Bhowmik (2019).

##### **4.1 Blowing of 'shankha' and ringing of 'ghanta'**

One such interesting traditional practice in the Bengali community is the blowing of 'shankha' and ringing of 'ghanta' or bell when performing 'puja' or prayers. May it be in case of 'nitya puja' or 'barshik puja' or daily prayer, it's a common practice for the community to blow 'shankha' at the end of the puja to symbolise the culmination of the prayer service. Similarly, the 'ghanta' is continuously rung with the left-hand during the puja as an accompaniment for the other rituals. The main purpose of using these two entities during the prayer service is likely to spread out the message to the locals of the area that one is performing the puja at one's residence.

Similarly, it is believed that the idol of Lord Narayan must be present when a priest performs special pujas. Therefore, it's a usual practice that when the priest enters one's house for performing a special puja, he enters the house with the idol of 'narayan' (a form of lord Krishna) in his lap. Thus, to spread out the information to others in the neighbourhood that the 'puja' or the prayer service is about to begin and that the priest has already arrived, the owners of the house blow the 'shankha'. Thus, the sound of the 'shankha' symbolises a welcoming of the neighbours to join the concerned family for the special ceremony.

We might interpret this as a symbol to create an awareness amongst the neighbours about the significance of the event or that of the moment in one's house. Thus, examining in Barthes' terms, the 'sounds' of 'shankha' and 'ghanta' is the 'sign' of the first-order system as well as acts as the 'signifier' of the second-order system, bearing the signified meaning of 'coming

together to celebrate the event or the occasion’. This is the connotative meaning of the sounds of these two instruments.

However, there is a visible practice of blowing of ‘shankha’ and ringing of ‘ghanta’ during emergencies, especially during earthquakes or when fire breaks out. It is seen that during earthquakes, irrespective of time – day or night – people start blowing ‘shankha’ and ring ‘ghanta’. It begins with those households where people realise the beginnings of the earthquakes and slowly all the other neighbouring houses and families gradually join in the same. The reasons as to why people blow ‘shankha’ and ring ‘ghanta’ is because they want to alert other houses in the neighbourhood and create an awareness in the neighbouring families about the earthquake, so that people can adhere to safety measures and safeguard themselves from dangers.

Thus, what we see is that the ‘sounds’ of these two instruments co-relate and establish a relationship further with ‘creating an awareness and passing over the message of probable danger’ to the community. Since the sounds from these two instruments are loud enough, it is sufficient to reach a larger area so that people can realise the earthquake and take measures to safeguard themselves and their families. Thus, this is a collective effort put by the community for a social concern and a good cause.

This is clear evidence that the connotative meaning of ‘coming together to celebrate the event or the occasion’ has now been further extended over or applied to connotatively also mean ‘creating an awareness to take precautionary measures’. Thus, whenever people use these instruments, especially blow ‘shankha’ at odd hours of the day, the neighbours are alert with regards to any probable threat that the concerned family or the locality might be prone to. Thus, the usage of these instruments is not restricted to ‘puja’ or prayer service alone but has been extended to a wider domain that of ‘passing the information or message of a social concern’ or ‘creating an awareness’ in the immediate locality or neighbourhood.

#### **4.2 Reservations for the Mothers and Their New-borns**

Thakur, Roy, et al. (2024) in their paper refer to the traditional practices in India during pregnancy, childbirth and newborn care, where they have talked about many myths and superstitions that are prevailing in the society and their effects. With reference to these, one

age-old one-month long practice is to keep the mother and her new-born in a room, popularly known as ‘aatur ghor’, which must not be accessible to the rest of the family for their needs. According to the practice, the mother and the infant are prohibited from stepping out of the room – ‘aatur ghor’ - and nobody, except the nurse or the attendant, is permitted to enter the room.

In case an individual (a relative or a well-wisher) intends to visit or is willingly to meet the mother or the new-born, he/she will have to compulsorily take a head-bath and clean oneself off immediately after having stepped out from the specified room. Only after which that individual gets accepted in the family/ society and can continue his/her normal chores, else not. Thus, the common general existing practice makes the specified room – the ‘aatur ghor’ - look like a confinement cell from which the mother and the new-born has no break or escape for a long period of one month and above all, the mother and the new-born are treated as ‘untouchables’.

In the existing practice, food for the mother is served in utensils and kept at the boundaries of the so-called confinement cell or room and then either the mother herself or the attendant takes the food into the room, where it must be consumed.

This is a practice that is stricter and sterner in the villages; in the lower strata of the society while in the educated class today it is easing out with certain liberties.

Examining from the scientific point of view, after childbirth, the mother and the new-borns must be kept safe in a clean hygienic room to ensure that both the mother and the infant are protected from infections, as both are then susceptible to infections at that stage. So, to ensure their health, it is advisable to keep them in a room which is not accessible to the other members of the family for their daily needs. Our ancestors, in the past, must have introduced this practice of segregation of the mother and the new-born owing to these reasons of safety and protection, so that they could be kept away from harmful infections, which the locals and/or family members would be carrying but were unaware of them. This was indeed a justified practice that must have been introduced in our culture in the ancient days.



But quite on the contrary, it has today become a stigma and that the mother and the child, both are treated as untouchables and so nobody goes near to them or enters the room they are kept locked up and if an individual comes in physical contact with them even by mistake, then the persons / individuals are forced to take a head bath, cleaning themselves appropriately to be accepted back in the family(/society). Contrary to the need of ensuring the safety and health of the child, which happens to be the root cause of keeping the two separated from others, the society today believes that the mother and the child are ‘impure’ and so anybody who would come in physical contact with them, would also lose one’s purity. The communities have thus, reversed the meaning of the hygienic practice in the long run and have substituted the symbols of ‘hygiene and protection’ with that of ‘impurity’ and hence, at large, have ended up with these superstitious beliefs and norms.

Thus, ‘aatur ghor’ is the ‘sign’ of the first-order system according to Barthes’ theory of Semiology and the image of the real room is the signified object – the denotative meaning. So, in the second-order system, if the ‘aatur ghor’ is the ‘signifier’, then it triggers the sense of ‘impurity’ as the connotative meaning today, instead of meaning ‘hygiene and protection’ – its original sense. Thus we examine a shift in the connotative reference with the passage of time and misinterpretation of the needful. This is thus, evidential for how the denotative meaning of hygienic symbols are extended over to a wider domain, though negatively, to stand for ‘impurity’.

Similarly, in Barthian terms if we consider the ‘sign’ of the first-order or the ‘signifier’ of the second-order system to be the ‘practice of having a separate room or space for the mother and the child’, denotatively it meant ‘protection and safety of the two’. But owing to superstitions and misinterpretation of the good practice, today the ‘protection and safety measures’ have attained a new meaning, that of ‘impurity’, hence, the connotative meaning of the said healthy practice.

#### **4.3 Prohibitions during Menstruation**

Similarly, there happens to be another such social practice which is a turned taboo today in certain communities and cultures alike certain segmented pockets in the Bengali community. In certain regions of Indian sub-continent, the five to six days of menstruation is considered

auspicious and females are worshipped during those days. However, there exists pocketed families, across regions, where these five-six days of menstruation is a taboo.

As mentioned by Garg and Anand (2015), as part of the education, girls in general in certain religions are instructed and taught since childhood not to perform puja or any rituals related to prayer during the menstruation days. As such, females can neither enter the prayer room nor temples nor take part in any puja related rituals on those days, when they are undergoing their menstruation. However, there are practices across regions where the communities/families restrict the menstruating women from entering the kitchen or from doing household chores on those days of her menstruation.

To add to this practice, there are families where menstruating married women are prohibited to sleep on beds<sup>1</sup> (or on the same bed) with their families and also are not permitted to apply ‘sindoor’<sup>2</sup> or vermilion on their foreheads on those days of menstruation, considering that during menstruation women are ‘impure’. Thus, today these beliefs are stigmatised and so menstruating women are held in disrespect on those days of the month.

We get references of these practices even in *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic, Sabha Parva (the famous dice episode) where Draupadi was forcefully brought before the court of the king by Duhsasana, when Yudhisthir lost Draupadi in the game of dice to Duryodhana. When Draupadi was summoned to be present before the court, she refused on grounds that as she was menstruating, it was not possible for her to be present before her elders (Gaurav and Parbat, 2024).

Another evidence of this practice is highlighted in the Bollywood movie named “*Padman*” released in 2018, written and directed by R. Balakrishnan, where two such incidents are projected. A married woman in one case and in the other a young girl, who undergoes her first experience of menstruation, are shown forced to abide by the social norms of menstruation anonymously agreed upon by the village community and hence these two women are made to follow the said practices.

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<sup>1</sup> In some families, they sleep separately on mats

<sup>2</sup> Sindoor or vermilion is applied by married Hindu females as a symbol of their marriage.

Though this seems to have been an age-old practice, this might have been a healthy one so that the menstruating women could take rest and take better care of her health (Jacquelyn and Sinha, 2023), which is essential owing to the loss of blood from her body. Owing to lack of sufficient evidence, though Garg and Anand (2015) in their paper refer to some, the ancient reasons cannot be justified today but this practice based on humanity grounds, based on medical reasons and one's encyclopaedic knowledge can be considered healthy as it symbolises 'taking rest and care of the menstruating women' so that she recovers the loss from her body and can overcome the menstrual pain and bloating.

However, it is negatively portrayed today in certain pockets of the present society where the menstruating female is considered 'impure' and so she is abstained from kitchen and other household chores. In some communities today it is observed that the said restrictions are reduced to one to two days or to two to three days on women.

Thus, a good practice, owing to misjudgement and misinterpretation has turned out to be a stigma in a small number of families in certain parts of these communities. Owing to literacy and spread of education, women have been liberated from this taboo to a noticeable extent but not completely even today.

Thus, if we consider 'menstruation' to be the Saussurian sign, in these pocketed communities, the word signify 'restrictions'. Thus, when the Saussurian 'sign' acts as the Barthesian 'signifier' of the second-order system, the word 'menstruation' thus should have referred to 'restrictions with regards to taking good care of the woman's health, ensuring sufficient rest for her and maintaining hygiene'. But, the misinterpretation of this healthy practice has led to the widening of the concept of these 'restrictions' but in a negative sense. So today the pocketed sections of the communities associate 'restrictions' during menstruation with the connotative meaning of "separating the menstruating female from the entire family, from performing household chores, prohibiting her from coming in physical contact with anybody in the family (society), prohibiting her from touching any physical object in the house". Therefore, confining her within a restricted place or a room in the house.

Thus, the connotative meaning is the one that is based on misinterpretation of the good healthy practice leading to superstitious beliefs and norms in the present society. Thus, in terms of Barthes' semiology the second-order 'signifier' concept has brought in significant challenges for the women and has led to setting up of a taboo in the so-called modern developing progressive communities.

#### **4.4 Wearing of 'shankha' and 'pola' Bangles**

The two bangles – 'shankha' and 'pola' – are an integral part of the Bengali community world-wide. The 'shankha' is the bangle that is white in colour and is made up of conch shell whereas the 'pola' is red in colour, crafted from red coral.

It is believed that in the ancient days wearing 'shankha' and 'pola' were the customs of the poor married fisherwomen, who owing to dearth of money could not afford to buy ivory or iron jewellery (Himaghna, 2025). So, they made ornaments out of the corals and conch shells that were easily available from the seas and sea-shores. Similarly, archaeological evidences proposes that conch shells were basic to local communities as they made tools, ornaments and other objects of worship too out of these.

So, in the ancient days in the community of the fishermen, these 'bangles' were a 'sign' that the woman wearing them is 'married'. But it was worn, not out of force or compulsion but because these fisher women wanted to look different from the unmarried girls of their community. So, any woman with these red and white bangles on their wrists denotatively meant that 'she was married'. So, these bangles came to signify 'marriage'. Interpreting this trend in the terms of Barthes, we can say that these 'red and white bangles' acted as a sign, the denotative signified sense of which became 'married'.

However, with the passage of time, the Brahmanic tradition fused with local customs, making the 'shankha' and 'pola' bangles an indispensable part of Bengali Hindu identity. This was a custom similar to the use of 'sindoor' or vermillion on the foreheads by the married women. On one hand where 'shankha' stands for purity, calmness and devotion to the marriage relationship, 'pola' stands for fertility, passion and blessing. Similarly, while 'shankha' means a bride's commitment to her responsibilities in the new family as well as the purity of her heart,

on the other hand, wearing a ‘pola’ signifies bride’s inclination to embrace her new-fangled role as a companion.

Thus, while in the ancient days in the fishermen’s community, ‘red and white bangles’ connotatively signified that the woman was ‘married’, later on the meaning of the ‘red and white bangles’ got widened with the passage of time and thus became a compulsion for every married woman across the Bengali community to wear them. Thus, the same ‘red and white bangles’ in the long run though retained its original sense of ‘being married’, attained a wider reason for its becoming a ‘mandatory ornament’ during the marriage rituals and even post-wedding in the Hindu Bengali community, irrespective of caste and social strata.

Interpreting in Barthian terms, the connotative interpretation of these ‘red and white bangles’ – the second-order ‘sign’ - today invariably symbolize her being married and that the woman approves of her willingness to support her marriage by extending support and hence, balance the marriage. The clingy sound of these red and white bangles is believed to bring good fortune and bliss to the couple. It also signifies eternal love and a harmonious gratifying matrimonial relationship. Thus, there are communities, where wearing these bangles on both the wrists symbolize woman’s marital status and also her associations with her cultural heritage.

Some four to five decades ago, it was more of a compulsion for every married woman to wear them irrespective of their social strata. However, today, women enjoy considerable liberties in wearing them. In fact, females use them as per the trends of wearing them in their immediate society. In some regions they are worn out of fashion either on both hands or only on one hand and are also adorned with gold designs at times. However, in today’s generation, opting to wear ‘shankha’ and ‘pola’ also reveals a married woman’s emotional state of being in her relationship.

## 5. Conclusion

Thus, the paper provides explanations and interpretation to some of the prevailing customs and practices in the Bengali Hindu society of today and tried to focus on the reasons as to why there are conflicting tendencies in the community. Myths, taboo, beliefs, norms, practices, superstitions have been part and parcel of every society, with a difference that some are overloaded while others enjoy liberties. But it is important and also interesting to understand

the reasons that guide them and fore-front them. As such, this paper made attempted to examine some of the eminent social practices and cultural norms prevailing in the Bengali Hindu community interpreting them along the lines of Barthes' theory of semiology.

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